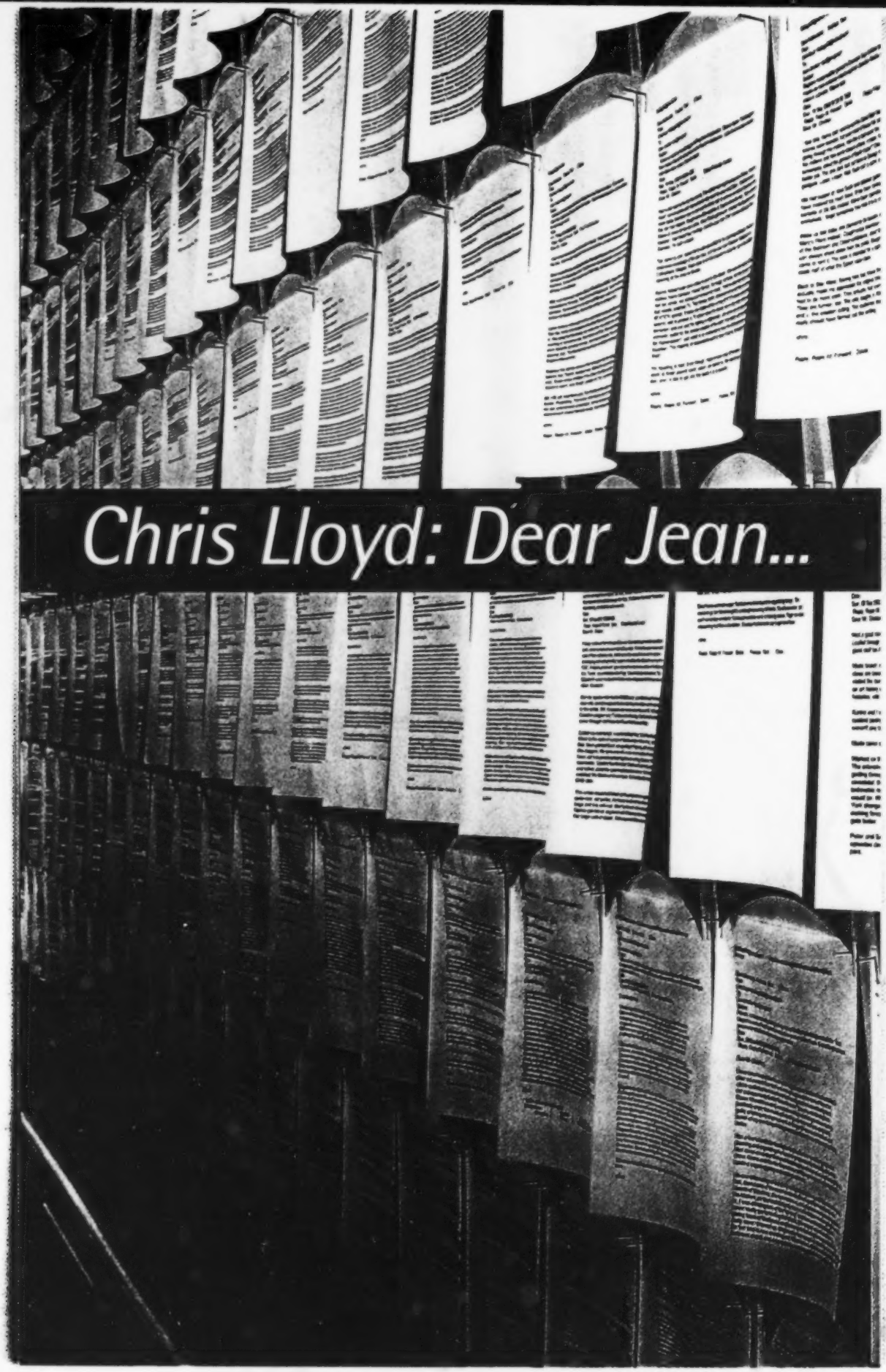

Chris Lloyd: Dear Jean...

103-06672/

Dear Reader,

It has been said that the most difficult of literary styles is the epistolary one, that is, a work of prose in the form of correspondence – a letter or a series of letters. The form seems somewhat old-fashioned. A hint of Victoriana clings around its edges. However, difficult or not, old-fashioned or fashionably retro, a letter seems the logical vehicle to discuss Chris Lloyd's own epistolary efforts. But let me state emphatically as I begin, that this letter is in no way intended as anything more than an introduction to this work of art, a mere gloss to the project. I write of a letter, but really it is going to be a series of letters – there is too much to recount for one letter, and I don't want to take the Victorian analogy as far as writing the way one of William Thackery's characters may have – between the lines, down the margins and on the back of the page. It must have made for a rich experience to receive such a letter, but I will not subject you to that profusion of textual styles. Rather, because of the nature of Lloyd's project, which we have called Dear Jean... for its exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, I think it best to approach my response to this project in three sections – a section on the letters, on the paintings, and a concluding section on irony, a key tool in Lloyd's undertaking.

Until next time, I remain,

Yours truly,
Ray Cronin

Dear Jean...

An Exhibition of Recent work by Chris Lloyd

Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Emerging Artist Series

Dear Reader,

This work, like so much art of note, is deceptively simple: sheets of paper pinned to a wall, a series of paintings hanging on another two walls. The gallery in which it is installed is long, high and narrow. One long wall is covered from top to bottom in printed pages, a grid of paper that rustles in the slight breeze generated by your passage. One's first impression is of text – words and more words, so many that to read them all seems overwhelming. For the past three years Lloyd has been sending daily letters via e-mail to the Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Honourable Jean Chrétien. It is printouts of these letters, which now number in excess of 700, that are pinned to the gallery's walls. The few responses that Lloyd has received, form letters sent in reply to e-mails sent in the first three months, are also on display. Those replies seem remarkably mute, despite, or perhaps because of, their officious cheeriness. Bureaucrats, of course, are risk-averse, so one should not expect much from their letters – the days of Anthony Trollope writing letters on behalf of the Royal Post Office are long gone. Official style today leans toward the bland. Little sound, no fury, but still signifying nothing. Their silence rings loudly, especially in comparison to the sheer weight of the other side of this decidedly one-sided correspondence. With so much information cast into the electronic ether, one can't help but wonder what sort of file on Chris Lloyd exists, stored in one of those drab "federal style" buildings, the office of an operative of an agency whose purpose is camouflaged behind an acronym.

PM INTRODUCES ETHICS OVERHAUL 2003
(National Post, June 12, 2002). Oil on plywood, 66.0 x 45.7 cm

Should you suspect that Lloyd's work is drab (or bureaucratic in its own systematic repetitiveness), let me assure you otherwise. His letters are filled with personal anecdotes,

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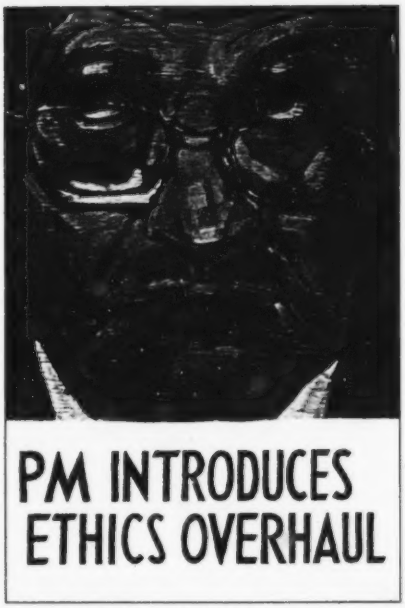
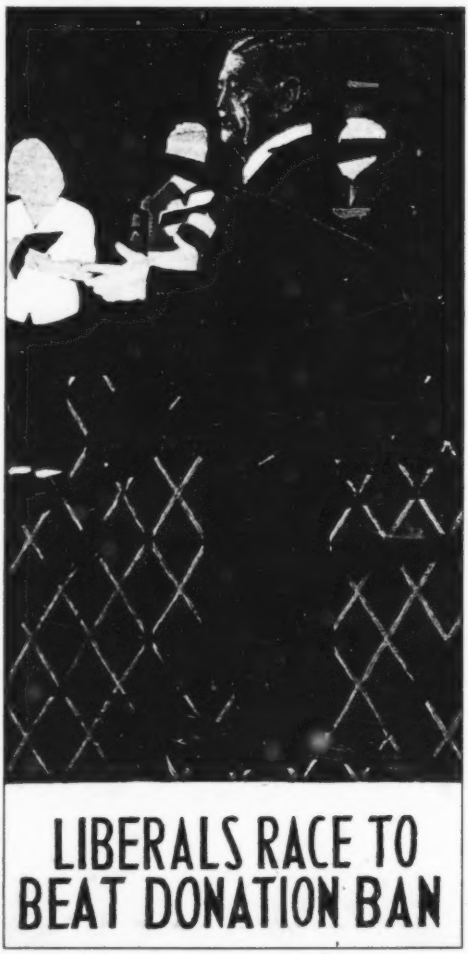


PM INTRODUCES ETHICS OVERHAUL 2003
(National Post, June 12, 2002), Oil on plywood, 66.0 x 45.7 cm

Should you suspect that Lloyd's work is drab (or bureaucratic in its own systematic repetitiveness), let me assure you otherwise. His letters are filled with personal anecdotes,

with descriptions of his daily activities, of events in his working life, of responses to issues of the day. Lloyd asks the Prime Minister for advice on occasion, and fills him in on a wide variety of topics: art, family, work, and more. These letters are a history, a document of a period in Lloyd's life, and, as he is coordinator of the Khyber Centre, a history of one interesting segment of artist-run culture in Canada. These letters, in their one-way communication, are a kind of diary, and like the familiar "Dear Diary," the PM is an interlocutor who remains mute. What does that silence signify? After all, "silence" is not exactly a trait one normally attributes to a politician. The Prime Minister's lack of reticence is made clear by the second component of this exhibition: the salon style hanging of paintings at the end of the gallery. After all, a shrinking violet would certainly not seek out the spotlight as relentlessly as does our Prime Minister, nor would a shy person welcome the glare of media attention that comes with his job, attention that is paid whether one seeks it out or not. It is not shyness, then, that is behind this silence.



LIBERALS RACE TO BEAT DONATION BAN 2003
(National Post, April 16, 2003), Pencil and acrylic on plywood
61.0 x 27.9 cm

Certainly a reasonable person would not expect the government leader of a nation state, even a nation state as habitually restful as Canada, to have the time to answer over 700 letters from one individual. But the PM does have a staff charged with answering letters, and is it not reasonable to expect some minimal response – at least a response in excess of the few form letters Lloyd received? Is it too much to expect a few "Dear Mr. Lloyd's," a smattering of "re your communication of April 12, 2002," or even "Dear Chris, all of us here at the PMO are wondering just what is up with all these e-mails?"

Lloyd's project reflects a penchant in contemporary art for strategic thinking. It is tempting to call his work Conceptual, after a specific, idea-based style of contemporary art. However, as tempting as it may be, and as apt as it seems on the surface, his work doesn't quite fit easily under that rubric. There are elements that hark back to the Conceptualism of the late 60s and the 70s: the repetition of a certain act or acts (writing a letter, collecting a newspaper photograph), the use of text, the reliance on a serial display, on "the grid." Yet, while these attributes may place Lloyd solidly on a certain footing vis à vis art history (On Kawara, Iain Baxter, Gerald Ferguson and, perhaps most of all, Garry Neill Kennedy, can all be cited as precursors), there is still something more going on. Conceptualism attempted to dematerialize the artwork, to reduce the object (which was seen as too much of a commodity) to an idea. Conceptualism's politics were often expressed in terms that referred directly to the art world, its critique of commodification played out primarily in the commodity driven world of the international art scene. While taking place in a gallery, and thus in the "art world," the political thrust of Lloyd's work is directed outwards, and is not couched in gallery-specific terms.

Outwards, yes, but not necessarily at the Prime Minister. This is not political work in service of the political system. Lloyd is not trying to unseat the Prime Minister, or to effect policy change. I tend to read this work as being addressed at its viewer – at you and me. I'm informed about politics for instance, but I'm certainly not active – I belong to no political party, and my political activism consists almost wholly in voting in general elec-

tions. What about you? How engaged are you in our political system? That is the question this work asks us, or at least, suggests that we ask ourselves. Political culture these days is akin to entertainment. (Do the politicians exist to sell papers? Or do the papers exist to report on their antics? Sometimes the distinction is not all that clear.) The "cult of personality" surrounding the leader of a modern nation state, a particularly noxious by-product of the information age, still reverberates today. Look at the cult status of John F. Kennedy, of Bill Clinton and of Ronald Reagan. Certainly, there is no cult of personality surrounding our leader, the little guy from Shawinigan, despite his characterization as "the Boss," as the "petit gars" and as a vaguely paternalistic figure who keeps things on an even keel, despite, or perhaps because of, seemingly doing little. Our leaders are figures ripe for satire, and Lloyd follows a long tradition in obliging.

Canadian officials call Bush 'moron,' tell U.S. to butt out of defense debate 2003 (National Post, November 21, 2002), Pencil and acrylic on plywood 48.3 x 43.2 cm

His satire is less direct than that of political cartoons, of course. As in Conceptualism, where the idea has been described as the machine that makes the art, Lloyd describes his approach as letting "a certain systematic approach set up the satirical situation, and the bureaucracy does the rest."

In his diary-like letters, and in his paintings drawn from the front pages of our so-called national newspapers, he subtly mocks the notion of a "great leader," but he does so by overtly satirizing the "common man" stance of this particular politician. Lloyd's letters assume a familiarity with the PM, a familiarity that politicians bank on, all the while remaining aloof. Of course you are already wary of the too-easy familiarity of politicians, and it is not that Lloyd is trumpeting some sort of discovery. No, this work's particular strength, its poetics as it were, at least for me, rests in its taking to absurd lengths a ridiculous premise. The premise, the PM is just a regular guy, is tested through the letters, and disproved with the paintings. A "regular guy," from Shawinigan or anywhere else, would have answered at least some of those letters. A "regular guy" would not have graced the front pages of newspapers to such an extent, nor would his actions (or inaction) have been the subject of so much hyperbole. The "regular guy" is, of course, a myth. I know that, you know that, and Lloyd knows that. Yet the myth persists, despite, or perhaps because, we all know it is fiction.

Sincerely yours,
Ray Cronin

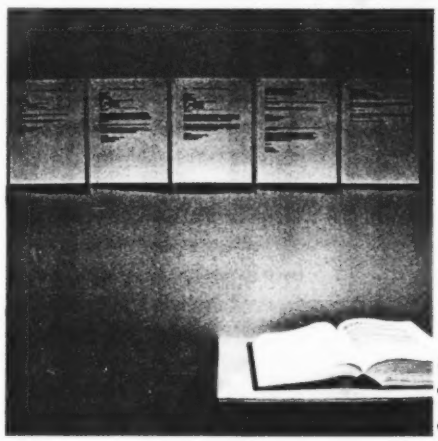
Dear Reader,

I ended my last letter with reference to fiction, as seemed appropriate at the time. However, to discuss Chris Lloyd's paintings, I think that a historical approach is in order. These are paintings of one individual, but they are not portraits in the traditional sense. Their sources are portraits, I suppose, the products of contemporary photojournalism. But these are something else. Chris talks of these works as having their beginning in his thinking about Goya, the Spanish artist of the first half of the 19th century, perhaps best known for his searing paintings of the Napoleonic war and its effect on the people of Spain. That was in his later days though – for most of his career Goya made his living by depicting the private lives of the nobility. Chris compares that to the roles of the "admen or filmmakers of today." Artists may no longer be the intermediaries between the powerful and the masses (that role is filled by the popular entertainment media) but the history remains. What also remains is a certain attitude towards painting. For whatever reason, a wall hung with paintings of the Prime Minister will be more arresting than the photographs on which the paintings are based. We are so inured to photographs, so inundated with images moving and still, that a painting seems somehow more authoritative, more real. The painting also seems more distant; we are less

likely to read it as a record than as an impression or as an expression. Lloyd knows that, and he uses it in his choice of images to depict, in the manner in which he chooses to paint them, and in the information that he chooses to include, or, more importantly, to omit. He concentrates on the PM in these paintings, reducing other figures to mere sketches, editing the already edited in order to arrive at the effect he is seeking.

Gary Castle

Feminism has asserted that the personal is the political, and I believe that. The choices that Chris has made in picking these images, in fashioning them, and in their display, all contribute to the subversive edge that is present in this work. Lloyd has purposefully made these works resemble posters, for instance, a decision that can't help but reference election signs. The hand lettering of the headlines reminds me of hand made protest signs such as are currently in abundance around Province House, just across the street from the gallery. These paintings reflect the history of Agitprop and activist art as much as they refer to the history of portraiture and court painting – and that certainly has its strains of irony.


Gary Castle

Best regards,
Ray Cronin

Dear Reader,

This last letter on the topic of Chris Lloyd's exhibition Dear Jean... will expand on the use of irony is his work, mostly for the selfish reason that irony is an area of interest for me – it was, in part, the chance to think more about the use of irony by so many emerging artists that prompted me to seek out Chris Lloyd as part of our Emerging Artist Series. Now, Lloyd's art is ironic in the strict sense – it says one thing to mean something else. That is, he writes letters to the Prime Minister knowing full well that no response will be forthcoming. In fact, that lack of response is, at least in part, the point. Lately the end of irony has been trumpeted, but, as with the recurring death of painting, the death announcement has been premature. Irony works because it suggests collusion between the speaker and the listener. If I say something is good, and mean the opposite, I am relying on you to make that connection, to figure out my true meaning. Irony fails when the distance between what I say and what I mean is so great that the hearer can't make the leap, and communication falters. Irony also can be used as a code, so that one speaker can say something to several listeners, and only those who know the code will understand what is really being said. Lloyd avoids this pratfall. For me, I have tended to distrust the use of irony. It seems too often to be a distancing tactic, a way of shielding oneself from actually meaning anything (like whipping a "just kidding" out of your back pocket) and thus from any responsibility for what one says. I see this work, this project, as a counter balance to the self-conscious irony of the shallowly hip – this work attempts to connect, doesn't just go through the motions. While the results of his activity are ironic (on many levels), the activity itself is carried out with sincerity. And that seems as good a point as any with which to close this essay in letters.

Sincerely,

Ray Cronin
Curator of Contemporary Art
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

List of Works

All works collection of the artist, unless otherwise noted.

Like family 2001
(The Globe and Mail, October 22, 2001)
Oil on plywood
76.2 x 35.6 cm

Ottawa targets child predators 2003
(The Globe and Mail, December 2, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
61.0 x 27.9 cm

Liberals scurry to show unity 2003
(The Globe and Mail, November 5, 2002)
Oil on plywood
48.3 x 43.9 cm

Canada backs U.S. on Iraq 2003
(The Globe and Mail, October 2, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
61.0 x 45.7 cm

The $25-billion legacy 2003
(The Globe and Mail, February 19, 2003)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
40.6 x 53.3 cm
Collection of Warren Creates, Ottawa, ON

Canadian officials call Bush 'moron,' tell U.S. to butt out of defense debate 2003
(National Post, November 21, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
48.3 x 43.2 cm
Collection of Warren Creates, Ottawa, ON

PM veers to the right...and left 2001
(The Globe and Mail, September 6, 2001)
Oil on plywood
30.5 x 25.4 cm
Collection of Chad Avery, Ottawa, ON

The cutest little baby face 2003
(The Globe and Mail, June 15, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
61.0 x 33.0 cm

'A CLEAR COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY' 2003
(National Post, April 23, 2001)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
61.0 x 30.5 cm
Collection of Warren Creates, Ottawa, ON

G8 snubs PM's vision for Africa 2003
(The Globe and Mail, June 28, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
55.9 x 33.0 cm

Surrogate baby trade given new impetus 2002
(The Globe and Mail, February 2, 2002)
Oil on plywood
58.4 x 30.5 cm

PM to Bush: Hold off on war 2003
(The Globe and Mail, February 24, 2003)
Oil on plywood
45.7 x 43.2 cm

Really, he's a friend of mine 2003
(The Globe and Mail, November 22, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
45.7 x 45.7 cm

Chrétien's long goodbye 2003
(The Globe and Mail, August 22, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
53.3 x 30.5 cm

PM INTRODUCES ETHICS OVERHAUL 2003
(National Post, June 12, 2002)
Oil on plywood
66.0 x 45.7 cm

PM basks in victory 2001
(The Globe and Mail, November 29, 2000)
Oil on plywood
45.7 x 25.4 cm
Collection of Jeremy Vaughan, Halifax, NS

SOCIAL SPENDING LEADS TO BIGGEST BUDGET INCREASE SINCE TRUDEAU ERA 2003
(National Post, February 19, 2003)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
61.0 x 30.1 cm

After the applause, Manley wonders if PM did enough to mend fences with U.S. 2003
(The Globe and Mail, April 9, 2003)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
61.0 x 38.1 cm
Collection of Warren Creates, Ottawa, ON

It was a perfect day in beautiful Whistler, until a cloud darkened Vancouver's Olympic hopes 2003
(The Globe and Mail, March 4, 2003)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
45.7 x 40.6 cm

PM ADMITS GRITS IN CHAOS, SETS '04 DEPARTURE DATE 2003
(National Post, August 22, 2002)
Oil on plywood
61.0 x 45.7 cm

UNITY TRUMPS MILLIONS STOLEN': PM 2003
(National Post, May 31, 2002)
Oil on plywood
50.8 x 45.7 cm

PM UPS ANTE ON FINANCING VOTE 2003
(National Post, January 20, 2003)
Oil on plywood
45.7 x 40.6 cm

LIBERALS RACE TO BEAT DONATION BAN 2003
(National Post, April 16, 2003)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
61.0 x 27.9 cm

Bush rips Corporate America 2003
(The Globe and Mail, June 27, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
53.3 x 43.2 cm

BUSH HAS WON, CHRÉTIEN TELLS ABC 2003
(National Post, March 10, 2003)
Oil on plywood
55.9 x 45.7 cm

QUEEN ASSERTS 'BOND WITH CANADIANS' 2003
(National Post, October 8, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
58.4 x 48.3 cm

Aid for agriculture 2003
(The Globe and Mail, June 21, 2002)
Pencil and acrylic on plywood
45.7 x 45.7 cm

Chrétien drops the axe 2003
(The Globe and Mail, May 27, 2002)
Oil on plywood
66.0 x 45.7 cm
Collection of Judith Mackin, Saint John, NB

Chris Lloyd: Dear Jean...
AGNS Emerging Artist Series
17 May, 2003 – 13 July, 2003
Fourth Floor, Gallery South (25)
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

Curator: Ray Cronin, AGNS
Curator of Contemporary Art

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Art Gallery *of* Nova Scotia

Artist Statement

I consider this to be an existential project of sorts, touched by the absurd and embodying a quasi-Fluxus nature. Through a basic form of storytelling I communicate the typical mundanaity, joys, sorrows, anxieties, successes and doubts that comprise the life of an artist in Canada from the dawn of the new millenium. Combining the structure of the daily diary with the pattern of the daily news story, I make the activities of myself and my community the subject of letters addressed to Jean Chrétien, Prime Minister of Canada. Why would he not follow our lives with the fascination that we all follow his?

The official silence that greets this project has never come as a great surprise. It highlights the divide between public and private life, as well as that between the glamour of celebrity, and the often mundane pleasantries of citizenship in Canada. My initial interest in divulging personal activities and thoughts to the "powers that be" stemmed from a concern with the tightening control on human activity through increased surveillance, and the proliferation of reality-type entertainment. For me this project has a lot to do with the politics and freedom of making art in a culture that is increasingly unafraid of (not to mention entertained by) a flaunted abandonment of both personal freedoms and public space.

Acknowlegements

I'd like to thank everyone who has contributed to this project, expecially Dan Walsh, Sarah Hollenberg, Dan O'Neill, Ray Cronin, the Khyber Centre for the Arts, Karina van der Linden and the PMO: "The Prime Minister always appreciates receiving mail on subjects of importance to Canadians".

Chris Lloyd